

Doctrinal Excursions and Recovery

Introduction

Early US airpower theorists and advocates realized their dream of an independent Service with the establishment of the United States Air Force in 1947. The Service was founded based on several key guidelines and principles, commonly referred to as doctrine.

This doctrine was battle-tested and proven during World War II. Doctrine should be the result of critical analysis, study, exercises, and experience, but is often influenced by other factors, such as national policy, individuals, budgets, and emerging technology.

Unfortunately, for numerous reasons, the Air Force drifted away from its doctrinal heritage for the first four decades of its existence as an independent Service.

This lesson provides insight into some of the areas where the Air Force strayed from established principles and examines the impact on the employment of airpower.

The lesson will then examine factors that brought about the return of the Air Force to its basic doctrinal beliefs. It is important to learn from these historical lessons in order to effectively employ airpower in future joint operations.

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Lesson Objective

The objective of this lesson is for you to comprehend the factors that caused the Air Force to diverge from and return to the guiding principles that helped establish it as a separate Service.

At the end of this lesson, you will be able to explain how various factors negatively impacted the Air Force's adherence to airpower doctrinal principles. You will also be able to discuss events marking the Air Force's return to its basic doctrinal beliefs.

Overview

The lesson begins by focusing on Air Force doctrine as it existed immediately following World War II. The lesson examines the impact of nuclear weapons on Air Force doctrine. The lesson shows how the Air Force deviated from its established doctrine during the limited wars in Korea and Vietnam.

The lesson will also describe events that forced development of modern joint doctrine and sparked the revitalization of Air Force doctrine. Finally, the lesson presents several recent events that demonstrate the Air Force's return to its foundational beliefs.

Cold War Doctrine

Following World War II, the United States became involved in the Cold War. The Soviet Union, and eventually the Warsaw Pact nations of Eastern Europe, were viewed as the potential enemy. In response, the US employed a strategy of "containment" that sought to limit communist expansion.

This new deterrent posture focused primarily on the ability to employ strategic and tactical nuclear weapons worldwide. Six years after the start of the Cold War, the Air Force produced its first manual on basic doctrine.

Air Force Manual, or AFM, 1-2, published in 1953, reflected the experiences of World War II and upheld the strategic bombing principle of attacking the enemy's heartland. The manual also indicated that future warfare would involve the use of nuclear weapons.

Air Force doctrine was on a path toward a doctrine based on a strategy of nuclear deterrence.

Massive Retaliation

In 1954, shortly after the publication of AFM 1-2, President Eisenhower adopted a foreign policy of "Massive Retaliation." This policy sought to counter the growing Soviet threat. It viewed nuclear weapons as a means of deterring war and as a first recourse should deterrence fail.

If the Soviet Union attacked Europe, the United States would use tactical nuclear weapons to blunt the assault, and Strategic Air Command, or SAC, would destroy the Soviet heartland with strategic nuclear weapons.

Because of its nuclear offensive capability, Strategic Air Command was seen as the prime force for fulfilling the mission of deterrence. The policy of Massive Retaliation completed the transition to a military strategy based on nuclear deterrence.

Although political policy changed in the years after Eisenhower, strategic nuclear bombing continued to dominate airpower thinking at the expense of doctrine for the conventional employment of airpower as an integrated whole.

Cold War Technology

An additional impediment to the reemergence of sound airpower doctrine during the Cold War was the powerful influence of technology. Funding for new weapons was concentrated in the nuclear realm in support of the national strategy of massive retaliation.

The development of the ICBM gave the Air Force a new mission and role within the defense department. Technology increased the accuracy of nuclear delivery vehicles and allowed the Air Force to use smaller warheads.

With smaller warheads, the Air Force could equip a variety of different types of aircraft as nuclear capable bombers.

The Air Force's technical superiority in nuclear weapons compensated for the Soviet superiority in conventional weapons and led to further neglect of conventional airpower doctrine.

Flexible Response

When President Kennedy took office in 1961, he modified Eisenhower's policy of Massive Retaliation and adopted a stance of Flexible Response.

This policy included the use of conventional forces in war and offered alternatives to total nuclear war.

The alternatives consisted of an increase in conventional weapons systems and introduced the concept of limited nuclear war. Both President Kennedy and his successor, Lyndon Johnson, determined that effective military power meant stronger conventional military forces and nuclear options short of global nuclear war.

While Kennedy believed nuclear deterrence remained paramount, he also understood that limited wars and low intensity conflicts should be fought with conventional weapons.

The Single Integrated Operations Plan (SIOP)

Although the policy of Flexible Response sought to increase conventional capability, the Air Force continued to focus on providing a nuclear retaliatory capability. The Single Integrated Operations Plan, or SIOP, became the Air Force's highest priority mission.

In accommodation of Kennedy's Flexible Response policy, the SIOP employed a counterforce strategy of targeting Soviet military systems and installations as opposed to urban areas. Unfortunately, the SIOP did not represent a strategic air campaign.

Quite simply, the SIOP was a targeting plan for nuclear war that provided for a timed release of nuclear weapons over enemy territory. A true air campaign would have employed operational art and integrated the application of all forms of airpower against the enemy.

Air Force doctrine's emphasis on the upper end of the spectrum of conflict left a significant doctrinal void on the other end of the spectrum ranging from unconventional warfare to conventional war. This doctrinal shortfall would have a marked impact on how the Air Force would respond to crises in the coming years.

Korea

Shortly after entering the Cold War, the US found itself involved in the Korean conflict. Since Korea was viewed only as a small part of a larger Soviet plot to dominate the entire world, US leadership decided that the resources diverted to this war would be limited.

This meant that nuclear weapons would not be employed. Thus, the use of strategic airpower did not offer the solution that many thought it would. For example, the World War II style strategic bombing proved ineffective in a limited offensive against a non-industrialized country.

As a result, strategic bombing in Korea did not produce the effects achieved during World War II.

In addition, the command structure implemented by the Commander in Chief of Far East Command, General Douglas MacArthur, caused numerous airpower coordination problems.

Korean Command Structure

Although the US Joint Chiefs of Staff directed the Far East Command to provide itself with a Joint Command Staff, the command operated for the first two and a half years without a joint headquarters.

An examination of the Far East command structure shows that airpower was parceled out and controlled by separate entities. The Navy controlled Navy airpower, the Marines controlled Marine airpower, and several commands controlled Air Force airpower.

Lessons learned during World War II indicated that airpower is best utilized through a centralized command structure. The failure to develop a true joint theater command structure in the Korean conflict caused numerous airpower employment problems and violated the basic doctrine of centralized control of airpower.

The convoluted command structure in Korea reconfirmed many of the hard-learned lessons of World War II.

Korean War Aftermath

The US attempted to fight the Korean War the way it fought World War II. However, circumstances surrounding this particular conflict were different. The nature of limited war and the prevailing airpower strategy of strategic bombing precluded airpower from being used in a more effective manner.

Furthermore, a true joint command was not empowered to provide guidance in the employment of airpower. In the end, no coherent air campaign was implemented against North Korea. In the aftermath of Korea, many leaders believed that the limited war was an aberration that would not be repeated.

The popular position was that the United States would never fight, nor prepare to fight, another war like Korea. Air Force leaders were only too willing to put Korea to rest and get on with the Cold War. Once again, deterrence became the watchword for the politicians and military strategists for the coming decades.

The Air Force retained its stance on strategic nuclear bombing of the homeland and virtually disregarded the lessons from the limited war in Korea. When the United States entered the conventional war with Vietnam, the nuclear posture of the defense department, once again, left the Air Force ill-prepared to wage a conventional air war.

Prelude to Vietnam

When the Vietnam conflict began, the Air Force was operating under the 1964 version of Air Force Manual 1-1. The manual bore the signature of nuclear protagonist, General Curtis LeMay. Air Force doctrine incorrectly stated, "The best preparation for limited war is proper preparation for general war."

Doctrine of the time stressed planning for general war, and it advocated the use of atomic weapons. Airpower doctrine, having been replaced by nuclear doctrine, left the Air Force completely unprepared for the conflict that erupted in Vietnam. The Air Force went to war without a viable doctrine for theater air operations in a conventional conflict.

Objectives in Vietnam

In 1965, President Johnson stated the fundamental premise for US involvement in Vietnam: "Our objective is the independence of South Vietnam and its freedom from attack. We will do everything necessary to reach that objective, and we will do only what is absolutely necessary."

The broad political objective was simple and clear-cut. However, the military's role, particularly the Air Force's, in achieving that objective was much more obscure. As it turned out, the American military objective was not to defeat or destroy the enemy. Rather, the military objective was to persuade the enemy that he could not win.

By any measure, this policy was a far cry from early Air Force doctrine that saw airpower as a decisive factor of war.

Vietnam War 1965-1973

Now you will see how politics, technology, and organizational factors led the Air Force on excursions from its established doctrine.

These factors contributed to an overall dismal performance for airpower in Vietnam. Yet, despite these hindrances, there were several shining examples of airpower employment in the midst of the gloom.

Look now at Vietnam and see the failures, so you may better understand the successes.

ROLLING THUNDER—Objectives

At the start of the Vietnam conflict, the Joint Chiefs of Staff recommended a hard-hitting, 16-day strategic bombing and interdiction campaign against 94 strategic targets considered critical to North Vietnam's ability to wage war.

This program was rejected by President Johnson and Defense Secretary McNamara in favor of ROLLING THUNDER—a graduated bombing campaign of North Vietnam that embodied both political and military objectives.

ROLLING THUNDER—Restrictions

Fearing escalation to a nuclear confrontation with China, President Johnson took personal control of the ROLLING THUNDER bombing campaign from 1965 to 1968. He not only selected targets for bombing, he also dictated timing, ordnance loads, sorties, and alternate targets.

In addition, most of the strategic targets inside North Vietnam were off limits to bombing. The result of ROLLING THUNDER was a bombing campaign that was not only unresponsive to local conditions but also lacking in both operational and tactical flexibility. This lack of flexibility precluded airpower from attaining decisive results.

ROLLING THUNDER amounted to a tactical, rather than strategic action aimed at sending signals of political will, rather than achieving decisive military objectives.

ROLLING THUNDER—Outcome

ROLLING THUNDER was the longest aerial-bombardment campaign in the history of American airpower. After this campaign failed, it revealed a great deal about the development and application of airpower in a limited war.

Foremost among the reasons for ROLLING THUNDER's failure was the disconnect between the political strategy of graduated response and the military objectives. Because of this dichotomy, the campaign failed to achieve the objectives established at the beginning of the war.

Contributing to the outcome was the failure of the Air Force to use lessons from the Korean War to prepare its forces to fight in a limited conventional war.

Civilian political policy, faulty assumptions on the part of Air Force leaders, and technology aimed at improving the Air Force's capability in a nuclear war presented the Air Force with a situation in Vietnam for which it was neither doctrinally nor operationally prepared.

Command Arrangements

This quote of General Kenney's initial assessment of command arrangements during World War II could also be applied to the command arrangements in Vietnam. In World War II, the command structure neglected to establish centralized command and control of airpower, until General Kenney took steps to rectify the situation.

During the Vietnam War, command of US airpower was fragmented and controlled by multiple commanders, a partial list of which appears here. During this conflict, at one time or another, there were at least seven different air wars in progress.

This division of airpower contradicted the early foundational principle of centralized command and control that was stressed by the Air Corps Tactical School and other airpower theorists. Airpower was not employed in an integrated fashion.

The diffusion of airpower resources made it nearly impossible to obtain a concentrated airpower effort.

Route Package System

The Route Package System was a control arrangement devised by Air Force and Navy commanders because they could not reach a satisfactory agreement on the unified employment of airpower.

The agreement divided airpower into separate geographic areas for command and control. Ultimately, the Air Force and the Navy ran their own separate air operations within their respective route packages.

This command arrangement created air employment problems, similar to those encountered in the Korean War.

While the Air Force and Navy attempted a compromise command and control structure, the Route Package System was not the most effective command relationship for directing both forces toward a common objective and robbed airpower of its inherent flexibility and ability to create synergistic effects.

Khe Sanh

The Battle of Khe Sanh stands in stark contrast to the previous examples of the ineffective application of airpower. Khe Sanh was a US Marine Corps fire support base in northern South Vietnam surrounded by mountains and dense jungle.

For all practical purposes, Khe Sanh was totally dependent upon air support for its existence. In the fall of 1967, the North Vietnamese Army surrounded the Khe Sanh encampment of 6,000 Marines with 15 to 20 thousand troops.

To North Vietnamese General Giap, Khe Sanh was a politically significant target. Giap decided Khe Sanh would be the pivotal battle that would drive the Americans out of South Vietnam much like Dien Bien Phu had driven out the French in 1954.

Airpower at Khe Sanh

Despite their numerical superiority and incredible tenacity, the North Vietnamese were unable to prevail. The 7th Air Force Commander, General William Momyer, was made the single manager for air. Under this centralized control concept, Momyer made effective use of all Air Force, Navy, and Marine air units in support of Khe Sanh.

Operation NIAGARA supplied over 24,000 sorties, dropping over 98,000 tons of bombs on the enemy over a two-year period. The North Vietnamese were forced to lift the siege in March 1968.

The successful outcome of the battle of Khe Sanh can be attributed directly to adherence to both the doctrine of centralized command and control of airpower and the proper employment of coordinated, integrated airpower.

LINEBACKER II

Operation LINEBACKER II is another example of the effective application of airpower during Vietnam. To force a settlement of the Vietnam War, President Nixon directed an all-out air campaign against North Vietnam's heartland on December 18, 1972.

The President's objectives concentrated on using all forms of airpower to strike at vital power centers to cause maximum disruption in the economic, military, and political life of the country. The result was an intensive day / night air campaign known as LINEBACKER II.

The air campaign included strikes using precision-guided weapons, neutralization of area targets by B-52 aircraft, and suppression of enemy air defenses by the 7th Air Force and the Navy's Task Force 77 aircraft.

Coordination of these missions allowed LINEBACKER II to succeed against the world's most extensive integrated air defense system. After eleven days of persistent and concentrated bombing, the North Vietnamese sought a cease-fire and returned to discussions of peace. While ultimately successful, the operation was not without its problems.

The Navy and the Air Force achieved close coordination throughout the campaign, but true centralized control of airpower never existed. Nonetheless, LINEBACKER II's persistent and massive application of airpower successfully supported the President's political objectives.

Post-Vietnam Assessment

After the Vietnam War, Air Force doctrine retained a heavy emphasis on nuclear deterrence due to the continuing Soviet strategic threat. As with the Korean War, Vietnam offered many lessons for using airpower during conventional warfare. Instead of examining those lessons, Air Force doctrine experts chose to remain focused on nuclear warfare.

However, the Army did capitalize on the lessons of Vietnam and undertook an extensive reexamination of their doctrine. The Army's priority shifted back to Europe and the difficult problem of how to stop the Soviet and Warsaw Pact threat on a European battlefield.

Out of that reexamination arose a concept called AirLand Battle.

AirLand Battle

The AirLand Battle concept required coordination between the Army and the Air Force. This coordination was established through a relationship between the Air Force's Tactical Air Command, or TAC, and the Army's Training and Doctrine Command, or TRADOC.

During the 1980s, this relationship resulted in the Army's doctrine of AirLand battle being elevated as the Air Force's de facto doctrine and strategy for employing airpower in conventional conflicts. Under this doctrine, the Air Force was viewed as having a support role in conventional warfare.

Its land-centric focus relegated the Air Force to a position of exclusively providing support to surface forces. The Air Force did not articulate the contributions of airpower at the operational level of war.

This failure to address airpower's capabilities across the spectrum of conflict left the Air Force in the role advocated by many ground commanders in the 1930s.

Impact of AirLand Battle

The relative cohesion and strength of the Army-Air Force partnership from the end of Vietnam through 1986 was based on a number of factors. First, both Services were influenced by the unifying effect of the NATO defensive mission in Europe. Second, Air Force leadership believed in supporting the Army in conventional warfare.

Last, the Army had a clear vision of how it wanted to fight a future war—and the Army realized that Air Force support was absolutely essential for winning future wars. The Army, to its credit, articulated its doctrine for the operational level of war.

This doctrine influenced the development of Air Force planning documents, which contained a wealth of information on AirLand Battle targeting. Unfortunately, the documents did not mention principles or guidelines for strategic attack in conventional warfare.

Strategic was synonymous with nuclear to many Air Force leaders. Throughout the 1980s, Air Force conventional warfare thinking focused on supporting the Army. Air Force leadership failed to recognize that, while vitally important, supporting the Army was only one element in the application of airpower.

Operation EAGLE CLAW

In 1980, President Carter authorized Operation EAGLE CLAW to rescue hostages at the American embassy in Iran. The plan called for resources from all four Services, including Air Force C-130 and C-141 aircraft, Navy helicopters, and Army Delta Force Rangers.

The mission was overly complex and lacked an overarching organizational structure to assume command and control of operational forces.

These factors, coupled with a lack of planning and operational mishaps, led to the mission being aborted at the initial landing site, which was designated as Desert One.

The Air Force was doctrinally unprepared to enter into the complicated operations posed by EAGLE CLAW. The failed operation raised serious doubts regarding the ability of the Air Force and other Services to effectively integrate as a joint team.

Operation URGENT FURY

Operation URGENT FURY, a US military effort to rescue and evacuate endangered citizens on the Caribbean Island of Grenada, engaged the Air Force in another joint operation for which it was doctrinally unprepared.

Although the joint task force was ultimately successful in securing the island, there were major operational problems in the integration of air and ground forces. The same problems of command, control, communications, and intelligence that plagued the Iranian hostage rescue attempt also surfaced in Grenada.

Specifically, Service doctrine did not address the areas of joint operability. As a result from the outcomes of these operations in Iran and Grenada, military doctrine writers faced the task of addressing the problems associated with organizing and employing military forces under a joint command.

Goldwater-Nichols Act 1986

Both Operation EAGLE CLAW and Operation URGENT FURY demonstrated the problems of joint operations within the US military. The Goldwater-Nichols Act of 1986 was the mandate for the military Services to collaborate on developing joint doctrine for the integrated employment of joint forces.

The doctrinally-oriented Army was the first Service to embrace joint doctrine. The result was a land-centric approach to warfare. For the Air Force, this initially meant that airpower was viewed as a support mechanism to the land commander on the battlefield.

In spite of the land-centric focus, the Air Force did make some in-roads in the establishment of joint doctrine. Most notable was the emergence of the concept of the Joint Force Air Component Commander, or JFACC.

JFACC Concept

The JFACC concept provided a framework for integrating and employing airpower from all Service components under a unified organizational structure. The term, JFACC, first appeared in JCS Pub 26, *Counterair Operations from Overseas Land Areas*, which became Joint Pub 3-01.2, *Joint Doctrine for Theater Counterair Operations*.

Joint doctrine specified that one of the component commanders, presumably the one with the most airpower and the ability to command and control forces at the theater level, would be dual-hatted as the JFACC. The new concept got off to a rocky start.

During SOLID SHIELD 89, the Air Force Component Commander was not designated as the JFACC. The JFACC function was performed by a JFC staff with no command authority to control joint air operations. Not surprisingly, the Air Force Component Commander cited the exercise as a failure.

Keep in mind this exercise occurred one year prior to Operation DESERT STORM.

Revival of Airpower Doctrine

In the 1980s, several Airmen began a serious reexamination of airpower's potential to create strategic effects in conventional conflicts. Some airpower advocates turned away from the Air Force's prevailing focus on strategic nuclear war to concentrate on the unique capabilities of airpower, much as the early theorists had done.

The 1980s renaissance in airpower thinking led to serious discussions on employing airpower to strike vital centers with conventional weapons. The shift in doctrinal thought away from an over reliance on airpower's role in nuclear war once again gave strategic airpower a potentially decisive role in conventional warfare.

The test of airpower doctrine's return to its historical roots came in Operation DESERT STORM, or the Gulf War.

DESERT STORM—JFACC

Operation DESERT STORM validated the JFACC concept. The JFC, General Schwarzkopf, designated Lieutenant General Horner as the JFACC. The JFC provided guidance and direction to the JFACC who planned and executed the air campaign plan.

Control of all overland fixed wing assets was detailed on the JFACC's air tasking order, or ATO. The ATO coordinated the airpower of the Services and coalition partners necessary for successful combined air operations. Centralized control of joint air operations reduced duplication of effort and risk of fratricide.

The use of the JFACC in this campaign signaled the return to the basic belief that airpower is best employed as an integrated whole under the command of an Airman.

DESERT STORM—Strategic Bombardment

During the Gulf War of 1990 through 1991, Airmen saw airpower finally realize the potential envisioned by the early theorists.

In a comprehensive air and space campaign aimed at Iraqi vital centers, airpower devastated strategic targets such as communication networks, road and rail systems, and electrical grids, effectively rendering the Iraqi military incapable of fighting.

Strategic air attacks induced a near paralysis in the Iraqi military leadership and fielded forces eliminating their ability to act against or react to coalition forces.

Operation ALLIED FORCE

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The North Atlantic Treaty Organization, or NATO, forces flew more than 38,000 sorties in a campaign characterized by evolving objectives. The air war destroyed Serbian military capability and broke the will of the regime.

Subsequently, refugees were allowed to return home, and the Serbs were compelled to adhere to diplomatic agreements. By directly targeting those elements that supported the Milosevic strategy, conflict objectives were met through airpower.

Operation ENDURING FREEDOM

From the opening days of Operation ENDURING FREEDOM, airpower was a key component of combat operations. Demonstrating its global strike capabilities, B-2s based in Missouri flew 40-hour missions, while B-1s and B-52s based at Diego Garcia in the Indian Ocean flew 15- to 20-hour missions, responding to time-critical targeting in support of ground forces.

Other force employment improvements included increased use of precision weapons and unmanned aerial systems; enhanced theater-wide intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance; and a critical role for air mobility, airlifting and supporting forces in landlocked Afghanistan.

But perhaps the greatest tactical innovation of the war was the integration of Air Force terminal attack controllers with Army and Navy special operations forces. These small-units, teamed with the Northern Alliance, facilitated the devastating application of precision airpower, quickly toppling the Taliban government.

This unique combination of land and airpower represented a significant step forward in force integration.

Operation DESERT STORM

Unlike Operation DESERT STORM which began with a protracted air attack, Operation IRAQI FREEDOM opened with a near-simultaneous and integrated land and air offensive. This opening would portend a new level of joint integration for the US military and the Air Force.

Under a single air commander, the CFACC, all coalition air was coordinated and integrated throughout the theater. Air superiority was established virtually unopposed. Bomber aircraft from as far away as the central United States were again used to support operations, closely integrated with theater-based Air Force, Army, Marine, Navy, and coalition airpower.

The combination and effects of precision weaponry, real-time intelligence, and special operations were unprecedented. Airpower was able to directly attack tactical, operational, and strategic targets. Iraqi air and land forces, and command and control sites were decimated, while airpower simultaneously supported land and maritime schemes of maneuver.

The result was the collapse of the Iraqi regime in only 43 days. Adherence to our foundational doctrinal principles in Operation IRAQI FREEDOM demonstrated airpower as a decisive force in 21st century warfare.

Summary

During its first 60 years, the United States Air Force deviated from the foundational doctrinal principles that warranted its creation as an independent Service and later returned to those basic beliefs. Until 1986, the Air Force focused almost solely on deterrence and, if necessary, the employment of nuclear weapons.

This was the result of several factors including support of national strategies and technological advances. As a result, the Air Force was ill-prepared for the limited conventional wars that erupted in Korea and Vietnam. Additionally, the Air Force was unprepared to participate in subsequent joint operations.

In 1986, the Goldwater-Nichols Act mandated the Services work together in joint operations. This new emphasis on joint operations and doctrine spawned the creation of the JFACC to centrally control and integrate joint air operations. In addition, Airmen reexamined airpower's potential to create strategic effects in conventional conflicts.

Their focus on airpower's unique capabilities, coupled with advances in stealth and precision technologies, resulted in Airmen achieving the vision of early airpower theorists regarding strategic bombardment.

Airpower doctrine is an accumulation of knowledge gained primarily from the study and analysis of experience, which may include actual combat or contingency operations, as well as experiments or exercises. This lesson showed how other factors can affect an Airman's adherence to basic doctrinal beliefs.

It is important for today's Airmen to understand our basic doctrine in order to effectively advocate the Airman's perspective when future factors present themselves.